SUCCESS STORIES: LIFE SKILLS THROUGH LITERATURE

Prepared for:

Office of Correctional Education
Office of Vocational and Adult Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20202

Meghan McLaughlin
Jean Trounstine
Robert P. Waxler

January 1997

This document was prepared pursuant to Purchase Order 43-3JAU-6-00323 from the United States Department of Education. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the Department of Education should be inferred.

Table of Contents

Biographies

Meghan McLaughlin attended Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and graduated from University of Massachusetts, Boston, with a double major in philosophy and classics. She is certified to teach Secondary Language Arts and has taught adults reading and writing skills in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For the last eight years, she has lived in Portland, Maine, where she has taught Latin, Ancient Greek, and English at Portland High school. Formerly, she was an instructor with "Building Alternatives," a program for adjudicated youth incorporating vocational and academic education in Portland, Maine. **Success Stories: Teaching Life Skills Through Literature** is Ms. McLaughlin's first publication. Her poem, "Thinning Light," appeared in the June issue of Out of the Cradle.

Jean Trounstine is Professor of Humanities at Middlesex Community College in Lowell, Massachusetts. With grants from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, Ms. Trounstine developed a humanities-based theatre arts program, now in its tenth year, at Framingham Women's Prison. Three years ago, Women in Philanthropy, a state giving-organization, honored her as one of 23 "Women Who Care" for contributing to the lives of women in the State. She has served as a consultant to the Task Force oil Female Offenders established by the Women's Legislative Caucus. Her work has been featured in Boston Globe Magazine and on The Today Show, and her writing has appeared in The Catalyst, The National Drama in Education journal, The Community College week, and The Book Group Book.

Dr. Robert P. Waxler received his B.A. from Brown University and his Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where he wrote a dissertation on the poet and artist William Blake. He is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, where he also currently serves as Dean of Continuing Education and Summer Programs. In addition, Dr. Waxler has been the chairman of the Department of English and the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He has written articles on literature and the writing process, as well as essays on the humanities and business issues.

Preface

How to Use this Publication:

Success Stories is intended as an introduction to the theory and practice of using literature to teach life skills to persons who are or have been incarcerated. It is not intended as an exhaustive resource but as a springboard to further investigation by interested teachers and administrators as to the why and how of utilizing literature as an educational tool.

Readers will find three separate sections, each authored by a different practitioner who has used literature in a particular environment, with a particular audience, in a particular fashion. Each section contains three elements:

- a brief think piece on what makes literature such an appropriate tool for use with incarcerated persons;
- a description of the way in which that author uses literature ("Program Profile"); and
- sample lesson plans for particular pieces of literature that each author has used with his or her own students.

The publication has been structured in this way to provide readers a variety of options, as well as to illustrate the versatility and universal appeal of good books.

Toward the end of the publication, you will find a matrix of suggested readings which includes, for each work, a description of relevant themes and instructional tips. For those readers who are already using literature, this section, along with the bibliography following it, may be of greatest value. For others who are new to the idea of using literature in lieu of or in combination with other life skills materials, it may be helpful to read the publication in its entirety.

If you know of other practitioners who might find success stories useful, additional copies can be ordered, free of charge, from:

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U.S. Department of Education
600 Independence Avenue, S.W.
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Foreword

Two of the contributors to this publication have used literature for several years as part of an innovative program known as "Changing Lives Through Literature. " "Changing Lives" began ten years ago, when Jean Trounstine began to teach theatre at Framingham Women's Prison, the most secure facility for females in Massachusetts. Over time, she developed a unique approach in which participants, as part of a group process, blend their life experiences with the classics to create new works that they then perform.

At the same time, Robert Waxler, the program's co-founder, developed a series of novel and short story discussions for male offenders through the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. Starting with eight men who had a total of 148 criminal convictions between them, Waxler used the works of Jack London and Malcolm X to -- in the words of a May 1995 Christian Science Monitor feature on the program -- "stir assumptions and expand the thinking" of offenders.

Since that time, "Changing Lives" has been duplicated in various county houses of correction and has been recognized as a successful alternative sentencing option. The program has been brought to national attention through profiles in the New York Times and Parade Magazine and on The Today Show.

As an instructor with the "Building Alternatives" program, Meghan McLaughlin has used literature in a markedly different setting. "Building Alternatives" was funded, in part, through a grant from the Office of Correctional Education. Based in Portland, Maine, the program provides youthful offenders confined to the Maine Youth Center with the academic, vocational, and interpersonal skills they will need to transition to jobs and/or continued education when they return to the community.

Building Alternatives consists of a comprehensive 16-week training program. The curriculum focuses on carpentry and the building trades, but also provides academic instruction in writing, social studies, science, mathematics, and literature. All students participate in a "Values Course," in which basic values such as honesty, tolerance, industry, and commitment to community are explored through the reading of poems and short stories and through interaction with carefully chosen guest speakers.

Why Literature in Prison?

By Jean Trounatine

Correctional educators know well that illiteracy is higher in prisons than in the rest of the population. The study of literature offers many ways to improve literacy: it gives access to language, reading, writing, a shared culture, and one's own self. Still, not recognizing the power it has to change lives, many teachers shy away from using literature to teach offenders.

Offenders need instruction in the humanities because the humanities emphasize values, community building, and cognitive skills. Only if inmates confront their thinking can they begin to change. Classroom discussion, as well as reading on one's own, can begin this process. Students learn by observing what characters do and how they solve problems, confront issues, and succeed or fail. In classroom discussions, students voice their opinions and hear those of others. In some instances, they role play characters. As they learn more about their characters' roots, they become better equipped to think their way through some of life's problems.

Research shows that in order for education to be effective in prison, it must be meaningful to inmates. Literature reflects the diversity of human experience, and a teacher who chooses wisely can find texts that voice real concerns for students. We have found that men and women often respond to different texts. Although Modern American literature is most accessible, classic texts can work well, as long as relevance is sought. Because literature offers a more complex approach, it can open offenders, who have a tendency to see the world in black and white, up to a broader worldview.

Educating prisoners means dealing with intense, often personal reactions. Teachers can use literature to help students learn to react with words instead of with violence or negative behaviors. Without moralizing, literature becomes a way to question, rethink, and rediscover values. Such an education lets prisoners feel a part of a group rather than outside it, and most important, it prizes each person's point of view.

Why Literature?

The Power of Stories

by Robert Waxler

Our ideas about literature in prison are based in part on a belief that offenders often commit criminal acts because they operate from a value system that gives priority to emotions and primal instinct rather than to reason and critical thinking. We need to challenge that single-minded value system by using novels and short stories that unfold the complexity and diversity of character and human consciousness.

Reading is a direct and immediate engagement with language. Discussing what we read intensifies this engagement, giving us an increased sense of authority and self-confidence. As we build language skills, we build life skills. We learn our place within the world of language. In an important sense, by reading and discussing what we read, we all create our own place in the world. We become productive citizens.

Good literature can affect the lives of criminal offenders in many significant ways. When they interact with good literature, criminal offenders are engaged with stories and with language that inevitably have psychological, sociological, ethical, and spiritual dimensions for them. Why is this important? What are some of its implications?

Literature allows criminal offenders to feel personal experiences through their senses and encourages them to reflect on those experiences. When they read a good story, they experience that story as if it were their own because language and the images created carry a sensuous quality that they can feel "on their pulse." In a sense, literature holds a mirror up to the patterns of life and so makes people aware of those patterns. As a result, it helps criminal offenders to be aware of themselves, to be self-evaluative, and to develop life skills for negotiating new relationships with those around them.

Literature also contributes to the exercise of the moral imagination. Because it helps people see the various dimensions of an experience and makes them think about the complexity and value of human experience, literature encourages criminal offenders to empathize with others and to understand their inner selves, their motives and behavior.

Literature can teach criminal offenders that they are not alone. The experiences they read about in a good story are often their own experiences cast in a different light. In a way, all the stories they read are their own stories, and as such, help offenders to understand not only themselves, but also to recognize that others have gone through similar difficulties.

Literature helps offenders to understand that there are many ways of thinking about a person or an event. Reading a good story is like going on an archaeological dig: There are many levels of meaning to discover, and there is much to explore beneath the surface. In this context,

literature draws people away from the surface of life and compels them to recognize the feelings and interior emotions of others.

Literature compels criminal offenders to think about their motives and behavior in new ways. It shows them that actions have consequences. More important, perhaps, it teaches them that they have the ability to choose their actions. Good stories always clarify the boundaries of our mortality and demonstrate our limitations as human beings, but good stories also prove that although we do not have complete control over our lives, we do have some power to create options and alternatives.

Literature can free criminal offenders from the mind-forged manacles of their own consciousness by clarifying the experiences of their past and offering them opportunities to create a future. In this sense, good stories are intense moments of concentrated time. Too many criminal offenders appear caught in a one-dimensional, present moment. Literature reminds them of their own past and allows them to compare that past with their present. Consequently, it allows offenders to shape events and make judgments about those events. It gives them an opportunity to exorcise the past that haunts them, the nightmares that imprison their minds.

Good stories offer criminal offenders the opportunity to enhance life's meaning in other ways as well. A good story can, for example, offer a broad and inclusive picture of the range of human emotions. Through reading, they meet people that they have not known and encounter new and unexpected experiences. Criminal offenders can learn from literature that life has energy and possibilities previously unknown to them.

The best literature always entertains as well as teaches. It can offer adventure to break the boredom of mundane life, can give us comedy to make us laugh, or tragedy to make us cry.

Finally, reading and discussing good literature are closely connected activities that give power to each other, just as the power of literature is closely connected to the power of language itself. By its very nature, the use of language is a social activity; language connects us to each other and to ourselves. When criminal offenders talk about good stories around a table, they are using language to explore their own selves and, at the same time, interacting with others. Language gives them the power to express and reveal themselves and to persuade and gain understanding from others. When they use language to articulate their feelings and ideas, they also stop themselves from committing acts of violence.

Program Profile

Running a Program

When forming a discussion group for literature, I recommend that each group be limited in size from eight to ten individuals. Although the participants should know how to read, they need not he sophisticated readers. It is my view that the facilitator of the discussion should also he of the same gender as the offenders so that they can in part identify with him or her. The offenders should be expected to come to every class having read the stories, and they should be prepared to

participate in the discussions. As part of their preparation, they can consider such questions as:

- What kind of people are these characters in the story?
- Why do they do what they do?
- Do they change during the story?
- If they do change, how do they change and why?

Focus Discussion on the Story and Characters

The facilitator of the discussion group should work with the idea that topics being talked about from the stories mirror themes the participants are wrestling with in their own lives. However, the discussion should center on the stories and characters in the texts, not on the individual offenders. It is reasonable to encourage the discussion to broaden to themes such as male identity, male violence, the behavior of characters facing authority, and the relationship between the individual and the society. But the discussions should always remain rooted in the story and should always return to examples from the story. In the end, these discussions are about literature, not about personal therapy.

Draw Out the Voice and Identity of the Participants

Reading and discussing literature is a process of socialization. Through such a process, criminal offenders can rediscover identity and voice. The facilitator must work to draw this voice out and must be convinced that each participant has a perspective worthy of attention and articulation, a perspective that can add something to the story's meaning. In the process, all the participants can discover not only important lessons about themselves, but also glimpse various patterns of consciousness that appear to operate within our contemporary culture.

Try to Meet for One-and-a-Half to Two Hours

If possible, each session should meet for one-and-a-half to two hours, with discussion focusing on a couple of short stories or a novel each time. I recommend starting with a short story such as "Greasy Lake" by T. Corghessan Boyle.

One Example

Novels and short stories cat, have a dramatic effect on people in prison. But for that to happen, offenders need to know that literature can carry personal associations and can enhance their own dignity. Thus, it is important to use stories that directly connect with their lives. Moreover, it is appropriate that discussions about such stories he conducted in single-gendered groups. Male (or female) bonding and camaraderie can easily develop through the reading and discussion of good stories; part of the challenge is to make it clear that it is happening through language.

I recall meeting one group of criminal offenders for a series of literature discussions at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth a few years ago. That was the beginning of our

"Changing Lives Through Literature Program." There were eight male offenders in that first group, eight men with a total of 148 criminal convictions. They needed a change in their lives, and I was convinced that literature could help provide the life skills to bring about that change.

One offender, Jeff, had quit school after eighth grade. He had become a drug dealer, making, according to his own story, more money than most college graduates. Jeff had an impressive memory and clearly loved challenges. Eventually, he would tell me that the only challenge he had found equal to the streets was the literature discussed around our table.

Jeff was 22 years old, with a young daughter and a dedicated girlfriend. A part of him was still drawn to the streets and his buddies there, but another part of him wanted a change from the revolving door of drugs and violence and felt that literature could help him achieve it.

I have always believed that good literature has a healing power. At its best, it can make people self-reflective and thoughtful. It can give them confidence and hope. And, in fact, during the 12 weeks that these men gathered to talk about stories concerned with issues like male identity and violence, literature did prove that it could change lives; it could make a difference. Interestingly enough, it may have changed my life as much as it changed those of the criminal offenders

One night, for example, we were discussing the novel *Deliverance*, a story by James Dickey about four suburban men who decide to take a white-water canoe trip through the swamps and rivers of the Deep South. The trip along the river grows increasingly chaotic for these men. It is as if they confront their own wildness in the rapids, finally uncovering their buried rage. In their rush down the river, one of them dies; all of them are changed utterly. Their trip is clearly a trip into the self, and those reading and discussing the story take a similar trip and discover new territory in their own psychic terrain.

"As I was reading the novel," said John, one of the offenders around the table that night, "I was trying to picture myself in the characters' places." John finally identified with the character named Ed. Ed is not the macho leader of the group, not a man who procrastinates until he is called on to deliver. And in the end he does deliver. As John put it, he, like Ed, often hesitated; but in the end, he says, "I can do what has to he done."

Like Ed, John recognized himself through his experiences and through his ability to reflect on those experiences. Both he and Ed became empowered, found their strength, understood they could make choices. Through that reading group, the characters in the book and the participants all joined together, came alive, were bound to each other through the miracle of language. We shaped our own characters by recognizing and forming the boundaries and limitations of the fictional characters we were discussing.

I have found through working with several groups that on the whole these men love adventure stories with action-filled plots that hold their attention. They want to be spellbound, and literature can provide such seduction. But, in the end, it is not the plot as much as the characters that possess us and then set us free. It is as if a part of the character in the story mirrors a part of our own lives, and then we interact with that character and each other. In the process, we learn

important lessons about ourselves and the society that surrounds us.

Sea Wolf by Jack London is another novel popular with many of the men in these groups. It is a story of a rugged captain, Wolf Larsen, and his first mate, Humphrey Van Weyden. Larsen is a man of great passion and rage. He believes that might makes right. By contrast, Weyden is wimpish at first, but gains in strength as the story evolves. By the end, Van Weyden is delivered, while Larsen dies. "I used to be like Wolf Larsen," one of the men once claimed. I thought I could manipulate everyone. I was stupid then."

And that is part of the power of literature. It allows men filled with rage to give that rage shape, to recognize it, and so finally to understand it. In some of the groups I will ask the men to read Affliction by Russell Banks. That story is about the affliction of rage itself. Perhaps too often, the story reminds the men of their own families and of the lives they have lived. They recall the revolving door of family violence and talk about the way such violence is perpetuated, as it is in the Whitehouse family, from generation to generation.

In the process of discussing such a story, these men get to know their own limitations. The story forces them to challenge themselves and make a choice. And this is where the hope comes, the magic, the possibility of transformation. Around the table, that rage and violence take a form created by language. The shaping power of words takes on its own life, has its own energy, becomes its own habit. Through the reading and discussion of such literature, men are initiated into new dimensions of consciousness shaped by a language that yields understanding.

Most criminal offenders that I have talked to about good stories have felt isolated for too long. They have been pushed to the margins of the mainstream and have, in essence, lost their voice and their connection to acceptable patterns within society. It is as if they are stuck in a perpetual present moment. Literature helps liberate them from that prison, giving them a sense they can create a future for themselves. Literature gives them the opportunity to see that there are many perspectives on an event, many dimensions to a moment in time.

Sample Lesson Plan

Greasy Lake

This short story can be handed out at the first session, and the participants can then read it silently. It should take about a half-hour for everyone to finish.

Summary

"Greasy Lake" tells the story of three 19-year-olds (the narrator, Jeff, and Dighy) who drive up to Greasy Lake, a local hangout, late one light to see if they can find any last-minute excitement before they head home. They find much more than they anticipated. Before they head home in the

early morning, it is clear, as the story's Bruce Springsteen epigram suggests, that they have been "about a mile down on the dark side of Route 8." The criminal offenders that I have talked with usually enjoy this story and identify with it, in part because it is a journey from innocence to experience and in part because it represents an adventure that leads to the thrill of danger and its consequences.

The story opens with the image of three young men creating their identity from the cultural signs of the times. They are trying to project all image of being "dangerous characters" because it is "good to be bad." We learn quickly, though, that these boys are typical middle class, suburban types, going to college, borrowing their parents' Bel Air car, and living at home over the summer. When they get to Greasy Lake though, they lose their keys, and, metaphorically at least, their footing in the darkness. It is as if they have entered a new territory of consciousness and experience, and for them it is frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

At Greasy Lake, the boys get into a fight with "a bad greasy character," whom the narrator in a terrifying rage hits with a tire iron, knocks out, and for awhile assumes he has murdered. Pumped by primal instinct, the three boys then attack the greaser's girlfriend, who is saved only by the lights on a car filled with another group of young men pulling into the parking lot.

When the second car, a Trans Am, shines its light on the narrator and his friends, they bolt for the woods, with the narrator landing in the midst of Greasy Lake itself. There the narrator seems to wrestle with his own darkness and mortality. In fact, the narrator discovers a corpse floating in the water just as he hears the voices on the shore ready to attack him. The young men on the shore, however, settle for smashing the BelAir and eventually leave. The narrator and his friends then emerge from the woods, discover the lost keys as daylight breaks, have one final encounter with two older girls looking for their friend (the corpse), and drive home. It has been an interesting night, a ride on the dark side.

Starting the Discussion

I usually start the discussion about this story by asking about the three boys:

- What kind of people are they?
- Are they really "bad"?
- What privileges do they have?
- How protected are they?
- How do they compare with the other characters (such as the "greaser," the girlfriend, the second group of guys, the older girls at the end of the story, and the corpse)?

Through this line of discussion, we usually gain a good understanding of these characters and then move to an exploration of larger questions, such as:

- Is it easier for someone considered "good" to be "bad," or for someone "bad" to become "good"?

Second Line of Discussion

Related to this initial line of discussion is a second line. The three young men are, in a sense, on a journey not only to Greasy Lake, but into their own self. When they lose their keys, they seem to enter a different world, one that they know little about, but one that is exciting and taps into their own primal energy.

I ask the criminal offenders:

- What do you think the narrator feels when he starts to lash out with the tire iron?
- How do these feelings relate to the subsequent attack on the girl?

In this context, I try to focus the discussion on a pattern common to many of the stories - and to the lives of the offenders. It is a pattern that suggests the seduction and thrill of adventure and violence, but also the destructive force within that unleashing of raw instinct and energy. We all feel that force and sense its power. Yet, we must all recognize what it does to our human connectiveness and, ultimately, to ourselves.

The discussion usually turns on the heating of the greaser and the potential rape of his girlfriend. I then ask questions like the following:

- How do these moments connect to the narrator's encounter with the corpse in the murky lake?
- What does the narrator feel at that moment when he first touches the corpse?
- What must he be thinking about?

Such questions evoke a variety of responses, such as:

He must be thinking about the fact that he has gone too far.
He must be thinking of his own death.
He must be thinking about how he almost killed the guy on the shore.
He must be wondering how he ever got in this mess.

Such responses allow us to explore the meaning of the adventure itself, the power and intoxication one feels when the adrenalin flows and the primal instincts are unleashed. The result of such a discussion is the beginning of a recognition that we have choices, and an understanding that human experiences are complex and ambiguous and often reflect a shared pattern of behavior.

A Third Line of Decision

Near the end of the discussion, I will usually begin to pursue another line of inquiry. I will ask such questions as:

- How do these three young men feel as they head home?
- How will they feel about these events in the future?
- Will they return to Greasy Lake soon?
- Will they pursue new adventures?
- Will they he eager for another thrilling encounter?

Sample Lesson Plan

Affliction

During the weeks that follow the opening session, I usually try to pick books that offer new challenges and at the same time deepen the understanding of central themes. The first few weeks I will ordinarily choose books that are relatively short and easily accessible. It is important to challenge the readers' thinking and literacy skills though; so as we move through the sessions, I try to select books of increasing difficulty and length. One of the more difficult yet rewarding novels in this context is *Affliction* by Russell Banks.

Summary

Rolfe Whitehouse, the younger brother of Wade Whitehouse, narrates this story about male violence, small-town life, hunting, and family traditions and habits. In a sense, Rolfe wants to rid himself of his brother's haunting story and defend himself against its violence. He also wants to understand what happened to his brother and to discover why it didn't happen to him.

The story's central figure is Wade - middle-aged, divorced, living in his small hometown in New Hampshire. Wade is a disappointed blue-collar worker whose best moments were back in high school (although even then he had to contend with beatings from his father). Through Rolfe, we first glimpse Wade in a tension-filled relationship with his young daughter Jill, who now lives with her mother Lillian and Lillian's new husband.

It is the beginning of the deer hunting season, so we sense the underlying rituals and tradition of male violence permeating this small-town culture. We meet:

- Margie Fogg (Wade's lover and old friend),
- Gordon LaRiviere (Wade's boss and power broker in the town),

- J. Battle Hand (Wade's new lawyer for his custody case),
- Evan Twombley (the labor leader shot and killed on his first day of hunting),
- Jack Hewitt (Wade's young fellow worker and friend, who reminds him of his younger self just as Jack's girl friend, Hettie Rogers, reminds Wade of the young Lillian),
- Sally and Glenn (Wade's mother and father), and
- several other characters who help us understand not only the suffering, but the affliction that stands as the great enigma of this human life.

The story explores the frustration of Wade as a man and his inability to assert power and authority, whether over his daughter or at the school crossing that he supposedly controls as a kind of police officer. It traces this frustration back to his own childhood and to his father's violence, drinking, inability to show compassion, and relentless need for control. In the end, Wade himself will spin out of control, killing his father in an irrational rage to release himself from the violence and the affliction of his life. He will also shoot Jack Hewitt before disappearing (or so we are led to believe).

Starting the Discussion

The discussion of this book, like that of so many rich and complex stories, can take many different directions and can last for several sessions over many hours. I usually limit the discussion to two hours, but there is always a lot more to be said. I begin with the opening scenes that show Wade nervous and uncomfortable as he picks up his daughter Jill and takes her from Concord to his small town. He wants to love and care for her, but he also needs to control her. He wants to be respected as a father, but he cannot discipline and respect himself. As readers, we glimpse his struggle; and although it is difficult to forgive, we understand it.

Using this opening discussion with the group, I begin to explore Wade's conception of the relationship between power and manhood, asking such questions as:

- What does it mean to have power?
- Why does Wade want control over others?
- Does he have control over himself?
- Does he control others?

Broadening the Discussion

Such questions inevitably lead us to other characters, those in positions of power, for example, but who often appear manipulative and self-serving.

- What is Wade's relationship with Gordon LaRiviere?
- What kind of person is Gordon?
- How about J. Battle Hand?
- Do these people help Wade, or in the end, given their positions of power, do they help primarily themselves?

We also discuss Wade's relationship to his brother Rolfe and, further back, to his father Glenn. Rolfe has avoided perpetuating the affliction of family violence by leaving town, getting a job as a teacher who does not connect very deeply to his emotions, and never marrying or setting up a family of his own. By contrast, Wade has stayed to struggle in his own hometown and wants at least to regain responsibility as a father. We usually explore this contrast in some detail:

- Who is more courageous, Rolfe or Wade?
- Who has set up more defense mechanisms against raw feeling and emotions?
- Is Wade a mirror image of his father even though he wants to escape the legacy of violence passed down from his father?
- Can he escape it?
- How does Jack Hewitt fit into this pattern?
- Why does Wade kill Jack and Glenn at the end of the story?
- Are we sure that he does kill them?

Related Line of Inquiry

Ordinarily, I will also explore issues and scenes related to the shooting of Evan Twombley during his hunting trip. It is never clear whether Twombley shot himself or was killed (perhaps as part of a conspiracy, perhaps by Jack Hewitt). The mystery itself is intriguing and fun to talk about. It also raises sophisticated issues about the telling of stories and, by implication, the power and authority of narrative:

- Who do we believe? Why?
- Do we trust those in power when they tell us something?
- Why don't we believe Wade's version of events?
- Are we sure that Wade killed Jack and Glenn, or do we simply accept that version of the story because of the authority of the narrator?

These are questions that not only help us to think about stories, but about life itself. They underscore one of the central premises of this project: That good stories help us to change our

lives because our lives are stories we can change. In the end, the lessons we learn from books have the power to transform all of us.

Why Literature?

Critical Thinking

by Meghan McLaughlin

The world of the incarcerated prisoner tends to be a narrow and self-absorbed one. There is a tendency toward the "woe is me" way of thinking that makes teaching basic skills difficult.

Studying literature is an effective means of counteracting that way of thinking. Reading a good story, we feel less alone. Through comparing ourselves to the characters and situations described, we can think more clearly about our own strengths and weaknesses and about how we respond to various problems and trials.

The narrow worldview of many incarcerated people can be broadened through the reading of literature. Good stories teach about compassion and deepen our understanding of human nature, life, death, love, loss, responsibility, and the consequences of good or bad actions. As they become good readers, the incarcerated start to ask questions about the characters' qualities and behavior, predict the action, recognize common themes, and draw analogies to their own lives. They become actively engaged in the story--questioning, understanding, enjoying, and learning.

Ideally, we should all be thinking about our places in the world and how we measure up to particular standards and expectations. Generally, we begin this kind of thinking and questioning during adolescence. And, while the typical high school student is guided through literature, family influences, rites of passage, etc., in how to think about and respond to life's situations, the incarcerated person, who could most benefit from this kind of guidance, is sadly neglected.

While the typical education for incarcerated people emphasizes training in basic skills, teaching these skills in isolation often fails to prepare the incarcerated individual for acquiring other skills. For example, teaching only for the high school equivalency degree often ends there. The students gets his or her G.E.D., and there ends the quest for further learning. But teach someone to appreciate and learn from literature, and the result is a person who will continue reading, questioning, analyzing, and learning.

Through reading and reacting to literature, incarcerated students learn to see their situations more objectively, to put aside feelings of hostility, to stop the habit of acting impulsively and the tendency to see things in black or white. They learn to move beyond that inarticulate and immobilizing sense of "I'm the only one who has ever felt this way, so you can't teach me anything." Letting the story be the teacher, the teacher becomes a guide who points out ways for understanding and learning from the readings.

Finally, as the students become more skilled in the basics of reading comprehension, critical thinking, and vocabulary acquisition, they become more thoughtful, and, hence, more human. They learn to compare characters and actions to their own lives and to ask the questions good

thinkers ask:

- How should I behave in a certain situation?
- How can I make my life a better one?
- What can I learn from the world around me?
- What can my own experiences teach me?
- Where do I fit in the giant scheme of things?

Program Profile

I began at "Building Alternatives" helping incarcerated youth in an alternative education program prepare for their G.E.D.'s and learn measurement and the other math skills necessary for working on a construction site. I also worked to improve their chances of finding employment when released by showing them how to find job openings, fill out applications, and write resumes and cover letters.

Although "Building Alternatives" has been in existence for over ten years, a three-year demonstration grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Correctional Education enabled our program to expand, allowing me to teach English along with math and life skills. Initially, I taught basic mechanics, e.g., rules of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

The teaching of literature, primarily short stories but also some poetry, came about because of concern at the lack of any positive value systems within the youth. Generally, their thinking was:

> *Well, I don' t care if I rip someone off as long as I don't get caught.*
> **Or**
> *It wasn't my fault, I was drunk at the time.*
> **Or**
> *Everyone does it.*

Since telling others how they ought to behave is seldom, if ever, effective, I decided to use literature as a way of showing situations in which a need for definitive action is required. We read these stories as a group, then discussed the action, the characters, and the consequences of their choices.

After the inevitable first reaction of groans at and suspicion of anything new - like reading literature - the students began to look forward to the stories and discussions. I found that they liked reading aloud and were willing to write about and respond to what they had read. The youth gradually learned to form opinions beyond, "I hated it/I liked it," to learn new words through context clues, and perhaps most important, to begin to recognize that literature can teach us something about our own lives.

I used stories such as "The Monkey's Paw," "The Lottery," and "The Veldt, which are easily found in most high school or early college anthologies. The selections deal with topics of greed, acting before thinking, conformity, the consequences of not having positive role models. The situations described easily compare to the lives of this population, to the circumstances in which they offended in the first place. Further, the topics are ones that are common to the closed world of the correctional facility.

Through literature, discussions about values can emerge informally. I told my students that we were discussing values such as friendship, loyalty, perseverance and compassion because these are what shape good people, good relationships, good lives. I explained that the stories had been chosen because they embodied one or another of these values in either a positive or a negative way. Sometimes, I told them which value I thought was most represented in the story, but encouraged them to look for examples of other values as well.

I found this overt presentation of our agenda helpful later on when we discussed the stories. With the purposes for reading literature clearly presented, it was easier to keep discussion focused on the characters and how their actions could be compared to our own experiences. 'We could then stay clear of the always-present danger of a discussion degenerating into "war stories," that is, personal tales of mayhem and crime that turn the classroom into a jail-house extension.

I did this, partially, by preparing activities around the stories that allowed the students to respond on a personal level but which aimed at a thoughtful contribution as opposed to a quick reaction. I also prepared several questions about the readings designed to help analyze and generalize them and to keep the lesson's objectives clear.

Through reading and interpreting literature, these students became better thinkers and more able and interested readers. In an engaging way, they were preparing both for their equivalency degrees and for functioning as responsible members of society - whether prison or the "outside."

Because the primary focus of Building Alternatives is carpentry training, conducting an English class that was effective and interesting was often difficult. Some of the problems I faced were:

- working with a class of multi-level students
- working with students most of whom were either designated learning-disabled or, hands-on" learners
- attempting to teach various skills without the advantage of having youth in the classroom every day
- creating interesting and appropriate lessons with little or no money to spend on learning materials

The class was structured so that "work-sheet!" type lessons covering a particular skill such as capitalization, punctuation, or spelling, were presented first. These lessons, given the once-a-week class time, may not have been sufficient for students to retain the featured skill, but I kept them in

the structure for two reasons. The first reason may sound odd, but I maintain it's the truth: even though they moaned and groaned, the students seemed to like the familiarity of having a work sheet they could complete and be graded on. It gave them a sense of having completed something and made them feel a little like non-incarcerated, average high school kids. The second reason: the work sheets were a good warm-up for the literature component. They gave me time to gauge who was in a good mood, who was sulking or upset, and generally how everyone was feeling that day.

Basically, the literature segment went like this:

Presentation of the story, its theme, setting, genre

An introduction to the author, if of interest

Some type of activity that would tie into the story (see examples in the sample lesson plans)

This was followed by a round-the-table reading of the story.

Reading the story aloud encouraged participation and attention and allowed those of a reading level below that of the story's to follow along. Because of the range of ability levels and personalities, nobody was made to read aloud, nor was a minimum length set. Thus, a shy or poor reader who nonetheless wanted to participate could opt to read a paragraph; better readers could read more. I did set a maximum length, however, because most people wanted to read, and I wanted to he sure there was enough story to go around.

We often stopped during the story to discuss a word or a paragraph that seemed difficult to understand. I encouraged comments, whether simply, "Nice guy!" in response to a nasty character or laughter at a funny part. Sometimes, I would stop the reading to ask if anyone had a guess as to what would happen next, encouraging them to look for clues that would help them predict the outcome.

Follow-up activities, like the pre-reading ones, varied according to the story. Always, I had prepared several questions about the action, plot, themes, and the values that were either exemplified or much needed. If the story grabbed the students, many of my questions weren't necessary.

It was important to guide the discussion so that it did not degenerate into tales of terrorizing and crime sprees. I learned that once they moved too far in that direction, it was very difficult to get the youth back to the comparatively staid topic of themes in literature. Thus, a quick, "reactions to the story?" followed by guided questions was an effective way to keep the discussion on track.

I used short stories because they are often more accessible than novels and because of the time factor. Since I didn't see my students every day and homework was out of the question, I used readings that could he processed in one session. I chose stories based on content, readability, length, and relevance to the students.

Sample Lesson Plan

The Veldt

Summary

"The Veldt" is a science fiction story about a family of four who live in a "Happy Life Home" which "clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them." The house also features a "nursery" designed to create make-believe worlds wished for by the children. In the past, the nursery had created scenes from children's stories and rhymes, but now it depicts a hot African veldt with growling lions and vultures nibbling at carcasses. The parents uneasily visit the nursery, only to run out when the lions rush at them.

Disturbed by the "death thoughts" emanating from the nursery but originating in the children, the parents decide to close up the place and go away for awhile. When confronted by the scene in the nursery, the children deny the existence of the veldt. They show their parents a nursery containing a pastoral scene. Realizing their children are deceiving them, the parents decide to consult a psychologist before taking the children away. The father says, "They're insufferable - let's admit it. They come and go as they like: They treat us as if we were offspring. Their spoiled and we're spoiled."

As they try to sleep that night, the parents hear screams coming from the nursery. These screams, in a nice bit of foreshadowing, sound vaguely familiar to them. Indeed, there is a lot of foreshadowing in this story. The father finds an old wallet of his, chewed and bloodied, on the veldt. The mother is missing a scarf. The children are cold and arrogant.

When the psychologist meets them, he declares that the children are spoiled and feels that they have been let down in some way by their parents. The mother asks her husband what prompted them to buy the nursery in the first place. He replies, "Pride, money and foolishness."

The story ends with the children luring their parents into the nursery and slamming the door behind them. Locked in the nursery/veldt, the parents watch in horror as the lions move in, realizing too late "why those other screams had sounded familiar."

Pre-Reading Discussion

I begin with a discussion on role models. Who did students look up to while growing up? Was it a parent? Step-parent? Older brother or sister?

This topic is a good one for gaining insight into the students' lives. Since they are an incarcerated population, their role models typically have been negative ones. I ask what they think the characteristics of a good role model would he. Although examples of had role models may predominate, working together, the students have come up with attributes of good ones. Often mentioned are grandmothers and, occasionally, teachers. Gradually, what emerges is a picture of someone who is consistent, caring, responsible, someone who holds one to a certain set of expectations.

We discuss these questions:

- Why are there rules children must follow that adults don't have to?
- What are some examples?
- What happens when these rules are not made clear or are not enforced?
- What about if there were no rules to follow or chores to do? Would we be better off or would we feel somewhat lost?

Post-Reading Discussion

My students react with horror and surprise to "The Veldt." In spite of the foreshadowing, no one seems to see where the story is going. As a result, I have the class go back over the story, looking for hints on how it might end. This can be more fun than it may sound. I start with the example of the father's wallet:

- What did it mean that the wallet was in the veldt, bloodied and chewed?
- What do they give bloodhounds before they send them off to track someone?

With this gory bit of foreshadowing at hand, the students are able to pick out other hints; for instance, the mother's missing scarf, the vultures picking at bones, the children's' attitudes.

We talk about predicting the outcome of a story by using personal experiences:

- What happens when you feel ignored and/or don't have enough to do?
- Is the tendency to react with negative emotions or with positive ones?
- How do the answers to these questions help us to understand the story?

Finally, we turn the question around:

- How can stories tell us something about our lives?
- Just because a piece of writing is labeled "fiction," does that mean there are no truths in it?

Sample Lesson Plan

The Lottery

Summary of Story

"The Lottery" takes place in a nameless village in a time that could be long ago or the present. The story opens with the townspeople assembling on what could be the town green for the annual lottery held on the same date each summer. We do not learn what this lottery is actually for until the last page of the story. We do learn that it involves everyone in the village, from infant to old person, and that some people seem to he uneasy, while others, especially the boys, are in good humor. Nearby is a pile of rocks. The boys play around the pile, filling their pockets with stones. The adults seem to avoid the pile.

This ambiguity around the setting of the story and the nature of the lottery itself creates a tension in the reader. We wonder what the heck is going on. Even a student who is not familiar with literature should sense something is amiss.

After everyone has been accounted for, the lottery begins. The head of each household must pick a folded piece of paper from a black box placed in the center of the assembled. When everyone has picked, the papers are opened. The person with a black dot on his paper must draw again, along with the rest of his family. The person within the family who gets the paper with the black dot, we finally learn, is stoned to death by the villagers.

The story closes with Mrs. Hutchinson, the one with the black dot, screaming, "It isn't fair, it isn't right," as the villagers move in on her, throwing rocks and stones.

Pre-Reading Discussion

Because of the title, I usually begin the lesson with a discussion about lotteries:

- Are the students' parents lottery players?
- Does anybody know anyone who won a lottery?
- What are some good and bad points about lotteries?

This is a good topic for breaking the ice because almost everyone knows a winner and/or a

devoted player. I hear stories about how devotedly people play the lottery, lucky numbers people play, which stores sell the most winning tickets.

The themes of luck and routine lead nicely into a discussion of rituals. When does a routine or habit become a ritual? What are some common rituals? Even in this less-than-traditional population, family rituals can be found: Christmas dinner, hunting season, birthday celebrations. A writing activity at this point is to have the students describe a ritual unique to their family, community, or group of friends. I give the students five to seven minutes to write; then they may tell others what they wrote about. The goal here is to elicit some themes common to rituals and the reasons behind them; for example, they are comforting to the group, a consistent act in an inconsistent world.

I introduce the story by explaining that the lottery in the story is a kind of ritual for the townspeople and that we should look for examples of ritualistic behavior as we read.

Post-Reading Discussion

Generally, the initial reaction to this story is one of horror and surprise. Students are convinced this story took place "a long time ago" and that nothing like this happens anymore. Alas! This is a population familiar with violence, so this reaction is short-lived and naturally evolves into stories about gangs heating up on individuals, jailhouse rivalries, etc. Although these topics can help students identify with the story, my purpose is to keep the discussion focused on the text.

Thus, the following questions:

- What rituals in our society are like "The Lottery?" What about football games? Cock fights? Capital punishment?
- What societal/individual needs do these rituals fulfill? (I have also brought up Christians thrown to lions, ancient Roman Bacchanals, religious rituals.)
- What values are present in or absent from this story?
- Are the values of compassion and responsibility represented at all?
- Can we learn anything from their absence?
- When is it right to go against the majority? How do we know?
- Is this is a story about conformity, or is there more to it?
- What do you think you would do if you lived in that town?
- Are the people in the village guilty of murder? Why or why not?
- What are our responsibilities as individuals?

Once, when we discussed this story, the class unanimously agreed it was a "weird" story that could never really happen. They wanted no further discussion. I told them

> *Okay, since you're so sure of the meaning of this story, we will do one more exercise, then move on. We will have our own lottery. The person with the black dot has to summarize the story for Joe* [our vocational ed. instructor who was in a nearby office, but out of earshot].

To these students, summarizing a story was worse than being stoned to death, so there was a resurgence of interest. We filled a student's baseball cap-several caps were volunteered-with folded-up bits of paper, one having that crucial black dot. As in the story, the students drew their papers, one by one. Nobody looked until the last paper was drawn. With great hooting and hollering, people waved their blank papers-all but the one who had gotten the black dot. He slumped down in his seat, suddenly the outsider. I called Joe in and explained that Charles would summarize a story we'd just read. Joe went along with it. As Charles began, the students turned, as one, and hurled their papers at Joe.

Amazed, I said:

> *Look what you've just done! You just stoned to death your vocational ed. instructor, a man ignorant of the ritual within this classroom.*

There was a sheepish silence, as they realized this was true.

After that, the class was more willing to discuss the actions in the story and the possibility of aberrant behavior in all of us.

Sample Lesson Plan

Monkey's Paw

Summary of Story

The story opens with a father and son playing chess on a stormy night while the mother knits by the fire. We see that they are a close family, humorous and affectionate with one another. Soon, "Sergeant Major Morris," an old friend of the father's, arrives and they all sit by the fire. The man regales the family with tales of his travels throughout the world. The topic turns to a monkey's paw which the man had once mentioned to the father. We see vivid foreshadowing about the paw on page three in these two sentences: "'It had a spell put on it by an old fakir', said the sergeant major, 'a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow.'" He goes on to explain that three separate people could each have three wishes from it.

The story quickly becomes spooky. The sergeant major mentions one man who wished on the paw and whose third wish was for death. The sergeant major himself had wished on the paw, he says, but won't tell his wishes. Instead, he throws the paw into the fire, advising the father to let it burn. But the father pulls the paw from the fire. After the man leaves, the family jokes about the power of the monkey's paw. They decide to wish for money - 200 pounds - then, laughing, they go off to bed.

The next day, a man comes to tell the parents that their son is dead, having been caught in the machinery at his workplace. As compensation, the company sent along - you guessed it - 200 pounds. The experienced reader can predict the course of the story now. Most of my students cannot. The mother grabs the paw and wishes her son back. In the dead of night, there is a horrible thudding at the door. The mother runs to answer the door; the father runs for the paw "and frantically breathed his third and final wish."

Pro-Reading Activity

Since the vocabulary in this story is sometimes beyond that of the students, I do an informal lesson on understanding the meaning of words through their context in the sentence. I give some examples:

- She was elated when she learned she was getting a raise. What do you suppose "elated" means? How would you feel if you got a raise?
- When his son was three hours late and still not home, the man was filled with trepidation as to what had happened. What do you suppose "trepidation" means? How would you feel if someone you loved was three hours late and still not home?

I tell the class that the story involves three wishes, then ask if they can think of other stories that have three wishes or three chances or three sons/daughters as a theme. "Why three?" I ask them. "Why not four or two?"

By exploring the three-wish structure, we are also realizing something about human nature; namely, the tendency to act impulsively, rue the impulse, and find a quick and easy way out of the situation.

Finally, I have the students imagine they find a genie in a bottle who grants them three wishes and to write these wishes down without telling anyone what they are. After we read the "Monkey's Paw," I ask them if they want to change their wishes.

Post-Reading Discussion

Initially, I let the students simply react to the story. Some typical reactions are:

Wow!
Was it really the son at the door?
What do you think the guy who wished to die had for his other two wishes?

We speculate for awhile, then move on to the themes of greed, impulsivity, and interfering with fate. I ask:

- What do they think of the idea that fate rules our lives and that only bad things happen when we interfere with it?
- Do we as a society believe this anymore? Should we?
- What are some examples of interfering with fate?

Students respond in different ways to these questions. Some believe we are controlled by fate; "Once a druggie always a druggie," one said. Others object to this notion, giving examples of how they have worked to change their lives. Examples they give of tampering with fate have been aborting a fetus, mercy killing, and capital punishment.

Concluding with the students' three wishes is fun. Realizing they haven't thought about consequences, some want to change their wishes. One student wished that life was an endless party, that he could have a girlfriend who looked like Cindy Crawford, and that he could get away with stealing anything he wanted.

A few of his classmates pointed out that an endless party would get boring; that he hadn't mentioned anything about the personality of the girlfriend; and that he should have just wished for the things he wanted to steal because, even if be didn't get caught, he was still doing something wrong.

Derry, on the other hand, made pretty good wishes. She wished that she would he the discoverer of a cure for AIDS, that her father would sober up, and that the world wouldn't end in a nuclear war. When I told her how selfless and thoughtful these wishes were, her reply was, "Well, I was going to wish to be rich and famous. But I knew something bad would happen from that. So then I figured, if I found the cure for AIDS, I'd be rich and famous anyway."

Why Literature?

The Dramatic Text

by Jean Trounstine

While literature opens us up to our imaginations and thus to our possibilities - **theatre puts imagination into action**. We move from picturing a character whose world may he unlike our own, to identifying, understanding, and trying on new behaviors. Thus, a woman who sees herself oil dead-end roads call lead a nation by playing a powerful figure like Joan of Arc. A man who yearns to have a better relationship with his brother uncovers a solution through Biff's words in *Death of a Salesman*.

Being another character also brings us out of ourselves. Our preoccupations with personal issues diminish as we learn to see the world through someone else's eyes. For inmates, known for intense involvement with their own problems and stark low self-worth, this is a meaningful end in itself.

In addition, theatre exercises, which use voice as well as body, allow self-expression. In the theatre classroom, students get permission to reveal parts of themselves that may be hidden, bottled up, or unknown. Embarrassment fades quickly as classroom norms lead to opening up, a sense of play, and creative action. Improvisation, where some elements of a situation are unknown, furthers these goals and adds to experimentation of behaviors. Inmates learn to cooperate, to take chances with positive results, and to be heard.

Researchers have found that inmates need to be humanized before they call rediscover values and reconsider morality. Though they are not the only ends of a drama program, **socialization, discipline, and the time to think are all important effects of theatre training**. The student who picks fights with others has to cooperate on stage. Lines must be learned. Often, research into plays and characterization affords thoughtfulness and a critical approach to history, music, art, and language studies. The theatre classroom becomes a place where relaxation rather than stress is rewarded, where self-esteem improves, where students feel safe to engage in both thought and action.

There is another benefit to theatre in prison programs: Proponents say **such programs give offenders a positive way of doing time and add to a less dangerous environment behind bars.**

Program Profile

Ten years ago, I began to teach theatre at Framingham Women's Prison, the most secure facility for females in Massachusetts. I gradually developed a method which helps women bring plays to life, piecing together their experiences and classic texts to create new scripts. First aided by grants from the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and then developed in collaboration with

Middlesex and Mt. Wachusett Community Colleges, my drama program utilizes literature as its foundation.

In the Beginning

Danny was convicted of armed robbery and second-degree murder, but she hoped on good days for a better life. She was a mother and grandmother who brought her knitting to classes. She had written poetry, performed in plays outside, and was keeping a journal.

Rumor had it that **Mamie** had committed arson. I knew Mamie as the gardener who took flowers to people's rooms, pressed petals and turned them into cards. She had been unsuccessful at getting a compassionate release, so she battled cancer alone. 'When we sat around the table discussing *Night*, she wanted to know how author Elie Wiesel got back his faith in God and if she ever would.'

Bertie, too, wanted to regain her faith in God. She was 22. Without any family to support her, she expressed her rage through writing. I knew she had killed someone; she knew she was guilty.

Gloria was a battered woman who had murdered her husband. She told me she lived in a red room in prison, haunted by memories of her past. Her son came to her in dreams, saying, "Mama, I wish I could have done it for you."

These women connected me with the ideas and feelings that Shakespeare's plays express. Like Lady Macbeth, the prisoners felt their hands would ne'er be clean." They seemed, like Shakespere's characters, larger than life, and I imagined his work might lead me into their world, and, on occasion, lead them out.

At our first gathering ten years ago, I announced to the women, all of whom had volunteered, that we were going to do *The Merchant of Venice*. Although they already knew me as their college English teacher, they still picked up their scripts tentatively. They insisted the play was too long and made wisecracks about words like "thou" and "hast." I decided then and there that we would read the play aloud; I'd tell them bits of the story as we went along, enabling them to feel successful. Then, back in their units they would reread, although many had difficulty focusing because of personal problems or the prison environment itself. Reading aloud in class was always optional, since some struggled with language; still, most wanted to try.

In the classroom, the prisoners felt liberated enough to immerse themselves in the play. They understood the text on an intuitive level, laughing at Shakespeare's jokes and elbowing each other at his bawdy lines. They argued about Shylock's intentions. Was he just a rotten guy with a lot of money who would stop at nothing when crossed? Or was he driven to revenge because his daughter had betrayed him?

We studied the play for three months, watching videos, learning about Elizabethan customs, trying on period costumes, and comparing great performances of the past. I also put the women on their feet with acting exercises. Standing on stools on opposite sides of a room, they whispered or shouted lines of a scene to one another. I wanted them to learn that Shakespeare's language

was tied to action. Then one woman said to me, "If we're going to do Shakespeare in here, we have to do Shakespeare so that everyone gets it, even the Latina women who don't speak English." That means, said Rhonda, "we have to translate the script."

At first I balked. Change Shakespeare's words? Use modern American speech? But they wanted to do a play for their community. And thus began what now has evolved into our method of working with text. Together, after much discussion and several read-throughs of the play, we paraphrase the text, allowing the prisoners to internalize the language. By bringing their lives to the play, this new script reflects both the text and the prison community. In the original text, Shylock tells Bassanio, best friend to the merchant, that he distrusts Antonio: "What, wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?" In our version, he says, "Oh, I suppose you'd have a pit bull attack you twice?" In the end, we always keep parts of the original, adapting the rest.

We decided to perform the trial scene, setting it in New York's 1920 gangster era, with Antonio, the wealthy and powerful merchant, as a Mafia boss. Portia was to be "disguised, the only woman in a man's world, something women in prison relate to. We saw Shylock as a recent Jewish immigrant to America, an outsider. As the tensions mounted between Shylock and Antonio, we hoped to ask the question, "What is justice?"

By casting Danny, an older woman and leader in the prison, as Antonio, the prisoners related not only to the play but also to the specific woman and her role in the prison. This double level of casting let the audience gain more access into Shakespeare's play. The literature then took on a life of its own. 'We weathered actors missing rehearsals for coveted doctors' appointments, visits, or disciplinary reports. I rented costumes, had the inmates help in painting a backdrop and creating a set, and got permission to bring in props and makeup.

As women piled noisily into the gym the evening of our first production, I worried. We were stacking the deck against Shylock throughout the play, hoping for the turnaround that Shakespere's script promises. The audience proved to be as involved as the performers, and we were not disappointed. When Antonio forced Shylock to convert to Christianity and when Gratiano leapt forward, spitting of Shylock, our judge took away Shylock's yarmulke, symbol of his religion. It was more than the audience could bear. "That's cold," cried out one woman. "You can't take away a man's faith," called out another. They had understood: There are some things you cannot do in the name of justice. For these women, sympathy for Shylock meant sympathy for themselves, for they, too, are outsiders; they, too, are redeemable.

Out Of Darkness

By stepping into the shoes of another, prisoners begin to see their lives more clearly. By adapting a play, they learn language and history, and gain access to classic texts. Performing for their peers brings self-esteem. To those who are uneducated and who describe themselves as "dumb,"unimportant," or "unheard," Shakespeare seems out of reach. To put what is considered most difficult within reach is perhaps the greatest lesson. Life again offers possibilities.

Each of the nine plays I have created with the women have offered them a way back. They all have characters who intrigue, plots that the prisoners can relate to, ideas that cause discussion, and endings that are ultimately hopeful.

- With Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, we dealt with AIDS and with the idea of being branded.
- *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' famous peace play, advocates that women withhold sex from their husbands until the men say no to war. We set it in Washington D.C. in 1918, and the women learned Suffragist history.
- *Rapshrew*, our rap version of *The Taming of The Shrew*, allowed prisoners to blend song and dance with Shakespeare.
- Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* gave women a chance to learn about the labor movement in the 1930's.
- Jean Giradoux' *Madwomen of Chaillot* became *The Madwomen of The Modular*, updated and set in prison.

We have also adapted and performed Josefina Lopez' modern play, *Simply Maria*, about a young Mexican-American woman finding her way in a new culture, and the old chestnut, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, which was uproariously funny. However, I emphasize classic texts because they both give distance and offer universal issues. Some students like Gloria need to overcome their belief that "Shakespeare is white man's theatre" and discover that great texts belong to all of us.

Certainly, the constraints of prison present challenges. Women get transferred, sent to Maximum Security, locked in their units; they have visits, give up and drop out. Space to perform can be an issue. Hauling costumes and props through security is tedious; one year it took two hours for clearance. We skip lights and use minimal sets, and inmate artists always volunteer to make posters.

However, even small productions or scenes produced in a classroom engender excitement. Adapting a piece of literature for the stage teaches prisoners to put feet under their dreams, give wings to action.

Sample Lesson Plan

The Merchant of Venice

Organizing Principles

Using this text with 8 to 12 students allows all of the participants to have parts and a few students to drop out during the course. Make sure all can read reasonably well, although some may he uncomfortable reading aloud. Since students eventually help each other understand the story and you will be assisting with pronunciation and meaning, I encourage students of all levels to join the class.Usually, there is a mix of strong readers and those who call barely handle the language. The important point here is to encourage diversity, which usually broadens discussion.

Pre-Text Activities

Before giving students the text, bring Shakespeare into the classroom. I borrow costumes and have women try on articles of period clothing as we discuss the Elizabethan world. The costumes offer them a chalice to dress up, and for women who have lost much of their childhood and now must wear blue or black, this is a treat. Costumes also allow students to sink into a different culture in a non-threatening way. Everyone looks silly in pantaloons and hoop skirts, and the experience enlightens them as to how different our world is from Elizabethan England.

Music and film clips can also set the tone, as can picture books and anecdotes. For example, I tell them how even wealthy people didn't take baths for health reasons, often wore one set of clothing (changing only the armholes), didn't brush their teeth, and used mint leaves for sweet-smelling breath. The idea is to grab the students' attention and interest them in a subject many have rejected or felt rejected by them. In order to let students' imaginations take hold, I resist showing *Merchant* films until after we have read and discussed the text, but a film that gives inmates visual images of the period works well. Allow one to three classes of background.

The Text

When introducing *Merchant*, I begin in a circle, by telling the story of the play, embellishing the plot, and describing the characters with flourish. Unlike in a reading group, where I expect students to read the play first, with a piece of dramatic literature, I find starting with the story grabs attention and facilitates the reading process.

Here is how we might begin: "Antonio was a merchant, sort of a big-time gambler who had money to spare as long as his ships came in." Intrigue your students with references they can relate to: "Portia is a lawyer, but had to disguise herself as a man in order to succeed in the courtroom."

In that vein, I introduce each scene before the students read it aloud. In the beginning, I give them parts somewhat randomly, offering a woman who mostly speaks Spanish a one-liner; a better reader, a more difficult part. However, women also ask to read certain roles, so I try to give all a chance to read whatever appeals to them. In between scenes, we talk about the characters and what they have understood. They ask questions and often comment on what they like or don't like. I ask them to go over what we read in class between classes, but with Shakespeare, many don't. This process of reading aloud and getting a good grasp on the text takes four or five hour-long sessions.

Focus On A Scene

After we finish the whole play, I often try to choose a single scene to focus on, since this helps keep the students from feeling overwhelmed. Also, if you are going to eventually perform,whether in class or for a larger audience, a single scene running about 30 or 40 minutes is a good amount to tackle. Our longest-running play was one hour and fifteen minutes, and we all felt it was a bit much.

The Merchant of Venice is a particularly apt play to do with female prisoners because it explores issues of:

- how women get power
- racism
- the ambiguity of crime
- the ambiguity of love

It also lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Finally, there are films available portraying Shylock, the classic outsider, as both revengeful and sympathetic.

With *Merchant*, the trial scene works well because it asks students to think about questions of justice. Try to look at the question of "what is justice" by getting students to talk about it from the points of view of different characters. For example:

- How does Shylock see justice?
- What difference does his daughter's desertion make to his perceptions?
- What does Portia bring to the scene and how does she envision justice?

Encourage students to try to examine the scene from different angles. At this point, film clips may be useful. Seeing different performances of a scene they have read allows students to grapple with contrasting interpretations.

Asking students to write about their reactions to the scene deepens engagement. Reactions to the reading or to different characters may serve as a springboard to discussion. When I produced

Merchant, I also asked students to write interior monologues from different points of view.

- What is Portia thinking when she enters the room?
- What is Bassanio's relationship with his friend Antonio?
- What is really going on inside Shylock's head when he demands a pound of flesh?

These kinds of questions lead students into a variety of points of view. "I never imagined I could feel sympathy for Shylock," said an inmate, "but he really had it rough. Imagine, your wife is dead, and then a few years later, your daughter runs away."

Improvisation

An effective format for my two-hour classes was one hour of discussion and one hour of acting. However, other formats could be used. The basic idea is to get students on their feet. Improvisation, where situations are set but lines are made up, enables the student to try his or her hand at playing the character and exploring the character's reactions. Improvisation engages students in another dimension of the play. Before inmates memorized the scene, they acted out the basic conflicts, making up lines, in order to more deeply understand characters' motivations.

One example is this typical improv set-up taken from the script:

> The magistrate (known to us as a judge) was visited by Bassanio and his friend Antonio to try to undo the bond made with Shylock. Before Portia enters, the judge is telling the two men that a new lawyer will arrive to handle their case.

Thus, an improv is set up for the students to act out: What will happen when Portia enters the room?

New understandings of the characters can he found through such improvisations. Our judge, when responding to an undisguised Portia entering the courtroom, looked over at her skeptically. He realized that Portia was a "she." Shakespeare's original line for the Duke of Venice was quite formal:

> *You hear the learn'd Bellario*
> *What he writes*
> *And here, I take it, is the doctor come.*
> *Give me your hand. Came you from old Bellario?*

Our actress, playing the male Duke as a court judge, says to Portia:

> *You heard what Bellario has written. I take it you're the famous*
> *lawyer? Times certainly have changed, women in the courtroom.*
> *Are you any good, honey?*

We later used these lines in our final text. Improvisation is one way to help students find their language and adapt a text for a performance.

Creating a Text

Even without improv and theatre training, a literature teacher can help students get more deeply into the text. Have students settle on parts for an "adaptation session."

Beginning with the focus scene, go through the original script, having each actor paraphrase her lines. I suggest writing down the new lines as you go along (having an assistant is the easiest route), so that you can use this new text for any sort of performance you choose. The adaption, comprised of pieces of the original Shakespeare and the inmates' vernacular, often has its own truths that enliven the original text. When students get tongue-tied, I let other members of the class help them, so that everyone participates in creating dialogue.

Usually, these adaptation sessions happen after we have decided in what era we will set the play, since we often change time and place for performance. I still encourage women to use metaphors that come from their world; vernacular mixed with original text enables them to "own the language," as was the case with the "serpent sting" to "pit bull bite" change in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Students often volunteer to type the adapted scripts. But if this is not possible, I do it for them, adding any cuts we made in discussion, lines discovered through improv sessions, and stage directions from the original text that I feel are important. I put each new script, typed, in a folder for each inmate. The next step is the stage.

Sample Lesson Plan

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a difficult but rewarding text for students outside prison and certainly for groups of female inmate readers. Like The *Merchant of Venice*, it provides a way into their lives. However, unlike *Merchant, The Bluest Eye* is a novel, and I do not adapt it for the stage. Still, it requires innovative techniques to engage students.

Summary of Story

The story details the life of two young girls as they seek to understand their growing up and the community around them. It contrasts the worlds of rich white Ohioans with the poor blacks of rural Lorraine; the tough but normal childhoods of sisters Claudia and Frieda McTeer and the traumatic growth of their friend, Pecola; the trust and playfulness of youth in the face of adult alcoholism, racism and sexual abuse. Pecola yearns for blue eyes; that is, she yearns for what she,

as a black girl, cannot have. Raped by her father and unprotected by her mother, Pecola eventually "gets" those blue eyes. It is Claudia and Frieda, and thus the readers,who learn from her sad tale. We are the ones who can change the cycle of despair.

Morrison's language, poetic and filled with a sense of place, draws students in, but also demands a focused reader. Because they are so drawn to Pecola's yearnings, women inmates often lose pieces of Claudia's story. I have found questions a way to broaden the book, allow students to reflect on their lives in connection to its themes, and engage the women in the idea that because of Pecola, there is hope for the community.

Pre-Reading Activity

When the book is assigned two weeks before we begin the discussion, I tell them a bit about Toni Morrison and some of the subjects of the book. It seems important to let students know that they will be reading about the roots of racism and abuse so that they might recognize the potential power of the book on their psyches. I also think it is important to establish a class community before introducing this text since it asks us to tackle issues about which the women have strong feelings. This endeavor requires trust and a certain degree of bonding.

Post-Reading Discussion

When the group has gathered, we begin by each taking a turn responding to the text. No one interrupts while each reader has a chance to say whatever she feels and thinks about whatever aspects of the text she chooses. The initial comments give students a chance to hate Cholly, the rapist father; pity Pecola; ignore the sisters; wonder why we read such a depressing book; or, occasionally, ask for what more they can read of Morrison's. This is where we really begin, with the intention to let them discover that there is more to the book through all our eyes. This pre-discussion response also sets a tone: we all have a right to our opinions; we all have responses that will be valued; we each need to listen as well as be heard.

Using a "Dick and Jane" reader from the 1950's, I read aloud show-and-tell pictures, and then ask students to consider what Morrison is doing with the opening of her text. This opening, a sort of "Dick and Jane" run wild, repeats itself throughout the text. Morrison takes the idea of the American family and condenses it in order to show how most of us do lot have "white picket fence" perfection. Most students have overlooked this because they don't understand it; the focus suggests looking closely is valuable. After looking again at the language, they begin to figure out how Morrison is setting us up to understand that, unlike in "Dick and Jane" readers, there is no perfect house, no white picket fence, and certainly no perfect family. They start to enjoy finding all the broken passages in the text that they overlooked first time around.

I ask them to think about who Claudia is and what the difference is between her background and Pecola's. They surprise themselves by remembering details: Claudia's mother took care of her when she was sick; her family took in Pecola; her father protected them when the boarder, Mr. Henry, "touched" Frieda. They begin to think about Claudia as more than teller of the tale.

Each character comes under scrutiny, as we attempt together to uncover the multitude of Morrison's truths.

- How do we learn to feel ugly?
- What does Pecola's life show us?

As rapidly as the questions come, they begin to fill in the blanks with "mean neighbors like Maureen," or "parents that tell us we're worthless like Pauline." Often, I ask them to underline language that they like, phrases that stick out. Maureen Peal, the little girl who taunts Pecola, has "lynch rope' braids," someone will always say; and I ask them why Pecola is taunted by both the black and white community.

It would be easy if we could let our students rest with partial understandings of reality, but great literature does not afford that. Morrison allows us to understand the rapist. Asking the women what happened to Cholly forces them to look past their hate. As they begin to see him, too, as a troubled child, a black man beaten down by a white society, they open themselves to more than one way of looking at the world.

Pauline, too, presents them with a dilemma.

- Why does she abuse her child?
- How do you then explain that beautiful passage of tenderness between Cholly and Pauline?
- What does Morrison want us to think?

One woman was so furious at Pauline for staying with Cholly that she said she would have preferred her indentured servitude as a maid to the white missus. The class challenged her insistence on that way of seeing. Morrison makes us see that there are no easy answers.

As the women sort through their new understandings from our discussion, they begin to offer new responses. They comment on how hard it is for all these characters to survive. They talk about how even the bluest eyes don't bring happiness or ensure fitting in. They stop considering some characters "bad" and others "good." Even Soaphead Church, the minister-gone-wrong who provides Pecola with her prized eyes, has a story worth telling. And hating a character tells us something about the hater as well as the character.

"Where is the beauty in this book?" I ask them over and over, not with that question but with all the questions, finding that we are unsilencing the silenced for all of us. "Claudia is a tree, and all the rest of them are bamboo," one woman said at the end of a class. Another replied, "It may be too late for Pecola, but it is not too late for us."

Appendix A:
Readings Matrix

Novels

Text and Author	Plot/Themes	Tips
Affliction by Russell Banks	Family afflicted with alcoholism and violence. Good for discussing (1) meaning of fatherhood; (2) family violence and chemical dependency; (3) growing up and living in small town New England; (4) violence, hunting, and manhood.	Somewhat difficult, but very rewarding reading experience; compelling drama and characters.
The Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver	A young woman accidentally becomes the mother of a young Native American child and raises her in the Southwest. Themes of intimacy and independence in women, Native-American values, and parenting as a learned skill.	Students love this book, which leads to good conversations about parenting.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison	A sad African-American girl who desperately wants blue eyes to fit into a white world is raped by her father; the community grows and learns from her tragedy. Good for discussing (1) conventional values of white America internalized; (2) issues of racism and color lines; (3) complexity of growing up black, poor and female in America; (4) issues of family violence and manhood; (5) values passed from generation to generation.	Somewhat difficult, very rich language, provocative scenes.
Deliverance by James Dickey	Four buddies take a white water canoe trip down a raging river. Good for discussing (1) journey down the river as journey to discover self in unknown territory; (2) dependency vs. self-confidence; (3) who survives best in contemporary world; (4) restlessness of comfortable life in suburbia vs. energetic rage of primal nature.	Good adventure, especially once they hit the rapids; provocative scenes.
Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant by Anne Tyler	A terrific novel set around a family's longing for communion and their inability to finish a family dinner. Themes of family as wounder and healer, longing for home, the lonesomeness of place.	A great starting point for a discussion on family dynamics; opens students to diverse points of view.

House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros	A poetic novel about the lives of Chicana girls growing up in Chicago. Themes of growing up in a new culture, the questions of leaving or not leaving the neighborhood, women as guides for each other.	Much imagery worth discussing.
Night by Elie Wiesel	A moving memoir of a father and son in a Holocaust concentration camp. Good for discussion of (1) journey into darkness and "night"; (2) ethical responsibilities in extreme situation; (3) a world turned upside down; (4) father-son relationships. Invites a look at prejudice, genocide, politics.	A harrowing story; easily accessible language.

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck	Two pals seek the American Dream during the Depression. Good for discussing (1) meaning of friendship and responsibility; (2) self-interest vs. sense of community; (3) meaningful dreams vs. illusions; (4) women in a male environment; (5) loneliness and individual isolation.	An accessible story with interesting characters.
The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway	An old man in Cuba goes after the "big fish". Good for discussing (1) heroism of perseverance and endurance; (2) need to follow your own destiny and discover fullness of self through continuous testing; (3) values of internal strength and self-knowledge vs. marketplace and external goods; (4) journey into deep ocean equals journey into depths of the sea.	A compelling story, accessible, moves quickly.
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn	One man's daily life in gulag prison under Stalin. Good for discussing (1) the value of the simple things in life; (2) surviving as happiness; (3) the honesty and importance of manual labor; (4) the meaning of everyday life.	Somewhat difficult because of names, etc.; short and straightforward story.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey	Characters in an insane asylum try to discover freedom and sanity. Good for discussing (1) the establishment vs. rebellion; (2) meaning of individual freedom; (3) security of conformity; (4) repression of passion and desire for mechanical behavior of daily life.	Moderately difficult; larger-than-life characters.
The Sea Wolf by Jack London	Men on a sailing boat with monomaniac as captain. Good for discussing (1) survival of the fittest and might makes right; (2) need for more than physical brutality and energy; (3) idealism (soul) vs. realism (body); (4) the need for feminine presence (love).	Good adventure and compelling characters.
Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston	Early 20th century novel about a woman who holds onto dreams in spite of disappointment and finds love.	The dialect is challenging, but the theme of what makes a loving relationship becomes food for thought.

Short Stories

Text and Author	Plot/Themes	Tips
"After Twenty Years" by 0. Henry	Two friends agree to meet in 20 years to compare their fortunes. One is a jewel thief, the other a cop who knows what his old friend has become. He sends a fellow policeman to the reunion, not being able to make the arrest himself. Themes of choices we make and friendship.	Because of dated slang, can be difficult for the novice reader. Story moves quickly and its sentimental nature, though dated, usually affects the readers.
"Everyday Use" by Alice Walker	A story that contrasts the values of home and tradition with education; a daughter returns to conversations. Her Southern roots and a mother stands up to her for the first time. Themes of sibling rivalry, education as improvement or hindrance, rural family values, and heritage and how it should be used.	Asking students which daughter they identify with leads to interesting
"Greasy Lake" by T. Corghessan Boyle	Three young men looking for fun end up at their old hangout but discover more than expected. Good for discussion of (1) unleashing of violent passions; (2) confrontation with mortality; (3) the need for exploration of self, but also recognition of limits of human self; (4) movement from innocence to experience.	A wonderful short story; a good ice-breaker for a series of discussions about novels, etc.

"How Much Land Does a Man Really Need?" by Leo Tolstoy	For a small amount of money, people can get as much land as they can walk between sunrise and sunset. Theme of greed.	The story may be difficult for some, so you may want to study difficult vocabulary before hand and prepare an introduction about seldom and why having one's own land meant so much.
"I Stand Here Ironing" by Tillie Olsen	A wonderful mother-daughter story about a parent's struggle in the Depression. Themes of mother-daughter relationships, single parent hardships, hard love.	Easily accessible; a great read-aloud and even better while ironing.
"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson	Townspeople gather for the annual lottery in which the winner is stoned to death by the others. Themes of conformity, the need for rituals, the tendency toward a pecking order.	Talk about lotteries and rituals beforehand. Since the reader doesn't know what the drawing is for until the end, it is good to prepare follow-up questions and hints for anticipating where the story is headed.
"The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs	A happy family is destroyed when they succumb to the temptation to make three wishes on the monkey's paw. Themes of tampering with fate, not being happy with what you have until you lose it, "if it looks too good to he true, it is."	Talk about the "three" theme prevalent in fairy tales; how humans often act impulsively, etc. Have students write three wishes before reading the story and talk about them afterwards.
"The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell	A famous hunter becomes the hunted when he swims to shore on a remote island owned by an eccentric hunter who has become bored with tracking mere animals. Themes of living by your wits, of being frightened and hunted.	Good for getting people interested in reading; works well with incarcerated students, many of whom have been hunted in one form or another.

"A Retrieved Retribution" by 0. Henry	A reformed jewel thief exposes his nefarious past when he uses his old can safe-cracking tools to rescue a little girl from a bank vault.	Kind of corny but effective, this story generate interesting discussion on what it takes to make people change for the better.
"The Sniper" by Lam O'Flaherty	A sniper in Northern Ireland shoots at an enemy soldier discovering later that he has killed his own brother. Theme of romanticizing war.	A fairly quick read and good if time is short or the class is distracted because it quickly gets into the action. Could relate it to gang wars, the Civil War, or families who split up.
"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"- from the novel *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien	A young woman flies to Vietnam to visit her fiance. She ends up loving the place, the combat, the aura of the jungle, and changes from the innocent Mid-westerner her boyfriend still is. Theme of changing, moving on, and how war affects people.	Some background on the Vietnam War and the nature of the times is helpful for younger audiences. This is a lengthy story, but its spooky and fantastical nature keeps readers absorbed.
"The Veldt" by Ray Bradbury	Science fiction tale of a "Happy Life Home" where everything is done for the family, with the result of children who are hostile and arrogant. Themes of what happens when physical needs are taken care of hut emotional needs are not; the effect of role models, lack of responsibilities, feeling of uselessness.	Good story for talking about mentors, good and bad influences.

Plays

Text and Author	Plot/Themes	Tips
The Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen	A wife finds herself subjugated in marriage, leaves in order to grow. A serious play with themes of marriage as a force for change, the female role, and male-female relationships.	Elicits great discussion of independence and marriage.
The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare	Themes of justice, religious/racial intolerance. When his ships are reported lost at sea, a merchant falls into debt to a Jewish moneylender, who then insists on the collateral the merchant has pledged: a pound of flesh.	Showing film clips of different interpretations of the roles (especially Shylock's) encourages students to view the situation from more than one angle.
The Taming of the Shrew by William Shakespeare	Funny, bawdy comedy of Kate and Petruchio finding love; who really is tamed? Themes of the war between the sexes, power in relationships.	Read aloud and get class to try acting a scene; then show two different film clips of that scene.

APPENDIX B:

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*U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE:1998-623-179/93473